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ABSTRACT

Typically, attributions of attitude are assessed after one instance of an actor's behavior. To determine what types of attributions observers make after the presentation of a sequence of behaviors, 135 college students were asked to make attributions about an actor's behavior after having been provided with category-based (group membership) and target-based (a prior behavior) information. The actor's behavioral freedom was left uncertain in order to determine whether observers would rely primarily on prior information or on the content of the behavior itself when making an attribution. Results showed that observers made a dispositional attribution even in those cases where possible constraints on the actor's behavior were indicated by the prior information. Only the confidence ratings and the perceived validity of the actor's arguments were affected. The results indicate that when perceivers are given a series of behaviors to interpret, each behavior is believed to be high in information value even when prior behaviors and background of the actor indicate otherwise. (JAC)

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Sequential Information Presentation, Behavioral Expectations, and the Observer Bias

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Abstract

The present research provides a further demonstration of the observer bias. Observers were asked to make attributions about an actor's behavior after having been provided with category-based (group membership) and target-based (a prior behavior) information. The actor's behavioral freedom was left uncertain in order to determine whether observers would rely primarily on prior information when interpreting such a behavior or whether they would focus basically on the content of the behavior itself when making an attribution. Observers made a dispositional attribution even in those cases where possible constraints on the actor's behavior were indicated by the prior information. Only the confidence ratings and the perceived validity of the actor's arguments were affected. Thus, these results indicate that when perceivers are given a series of behaviors by an actor to interpret, each behavior is believed to be high in informational value even when the prior behaviors and background of the actor might indicate otherwise.

Sequential Information Presentation, Behavioral Expectations, and the Observer Bias

Much controversy has surrounded the concept of the "fundamental attribution error" in the area of attitude attribution. Ross (1977) defines this as, "the tendency for attributors to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior" (p. 183). There has been some discussion about whether such a tendency on the part of observers can truly be called an error (Harvey, Town, & Yarkin, 1981; Reeder, 1982). There can be no dispute, however, that observers are willing to make dispositional inferences on the basis of an actor's behavior even when that behavior has been severely constrained. This has been demonstrated empirically in a number of experiments (e.g., Jones & Harris, 1967; Miller, 1976; Schneider & Miller, 1975; Snyder & Jones, 1976).

Typically, attributions of attitude are assessed after one instance of an actor's behavior has been presented. One purpose of the present research was to determine what types of attributions are made by observers after the presentation of a sequence of behaviors. Each additional behavior of an actor should presumably have the potential to modify expectancies regarding the actor's subsequent behaviors.

Jones and Berglas (1976) distinguish between category-based expectancies (formed on the basis of group membership) and target-based expectancies (formed on the basis of an actor's prior behaviors).

In the present research, observers were given both types of information prior to receiving additional information about the actor. Theoretically, the informational value of the target-based behavior should be low when the behavior has been constrained in some manner, and high in informational value when the behavior has been freely chosen by the actor. However, because of the existance of the observer bias, we predicted that even a constrained behavior might create an expectancy which would influence an observer's attributions about an actor's subsequent behavior.

In some situations, the degree of external constraint on an actor's behavior is uncertain. For example, consider a prisoner of war who speaks out against his own country. Was the behavior freely chosen or was it coerced? We created a situation where the actor's behavioral freedom was uncertain in order to determine whether observers would rely primarily on prior information about the actor when interpreting such a behavior or whether they would focus basically on the content of the behavior itself when making an attribution.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 135 undergraduate volunteers.

Procedure

All participants were asked to make judgements about a target person on the basis of limited information. Category-based information was provided indicating that the target person could be classified as either (a) a liberal or (b) a conservative. Pilot data indicated that persons with liberal beliefs were expected to

be pro-marijuana and pro-abortion. Opposite attitudes were expected for those with generally conservative beliefs. Therefore, for the purposes of this experiment, two essays (pro and anti) were constructed for each of these two topics.

After having been given the category-based information, subjects read an essay purportedly written by the target person. Half of the subjects were given a pro-marijuana essay to read and half were given an anti-marijuana essay. Half were told that the target person freely chose the position taken in the essay and half were told that the essay position had been assigned. Subjects were then asked to estimate the essay writer's true attitude (0 = strongly anti-marijuana, 10 = strongly pro-marijuana). Subjects also indicated their degree of confidence in their attributions (0 = not at all sure, 10 = very sure), rated the validity of the arguments contained in the essay (0 = not at all valid, 10 = very valid), and rated the convincingness of the essay (0 = not at all convincing, 10 = very convincing). Subjects were also asked to indicate their own attitudes and to estimate the typical attitude toward this issue (0 = strongly anti-marijuana, 10 = strongly pro-marijuana).

All subjects were then given a second essay to read, purportedly written by the same target person. This essay was either pro-abortion or anti-abortion. Subjects were not told whether the position taken in the second essay had been freely chosen or assigned to the target person. After reading this essay, subjects estimated the writer's true attitude (0 = strongly anti-abortion, 10 = strongly pro-abortion) and responded to the same measures as those which followed the first essay.

The design of the experiment was a 2 (Category-based information: Liberal or Conservative) X 2 (Target-based information: Pro- or anti-marijuana essay) X 2 (Writer's Freedom: Marijuana essay freely chosen or assigned) X 2 (2nd Essay Direction: Pro- or anti-abortion) complete factorial. Each response was analyzed by an unequal n ANOVA.

Results

First Essay.

As expected, attitude attributions for the first essay were influenced by the category-based information provided (Liberal: $M = 5.69$; Conservative: $M = 4.16$, $F(1,119) = 15.77$, $p < .01$). The liberal target person was rated as more pro-marijuana than the conservative target person independent of the essay content.

Also, as expected, there was a two-way interaction between essay direction and the writer's freedom on the attribution of attitudes. Subjects made attributions more correspondent with the essay content when the position was freely chosen rather than assigned ($F(1,119) = 10.20$, $p < .01$). However, consistent with previous findings, observers made attributions consistent with the essay content even in the assigned conditions. See Figure 1.

Observers were less confident about their attributions when the essay position was assigned (Free choice: $M = 8.33$; Assigned: $M = 6.98$, $F(1,119) = 11.93$, $p < .01$). They were also less confident when the target-based information (i.e. essay content) was inconsistent with the category-based information, resulting in a two-way interaction between these variables (Liberal, Pro-marijuana: $M = 7.75$; Conservative,

Pro-marijuana: M = 6.37; Liberal, Anti-marijuana: M = 7.94; Conservative, Anti-marijuana: M = 8.75, $F(1,119) = 7.30$, $p < .01$).

The anti-marijuana essay was rated as more convincing than the pro-marijuana essay (Anti-marijuana Essay: M = 6.91; Pro-marijuana Essay: M = 5.79, $F(1,119) = 7.13$, $p < .01$), and subjects were more confident about their attributions when the essay was anti-marijuana (Anti-marijuana Essay: M = 8.34; Pro-marijuana Essay: M = 7.07, $F(1,119)$ = 10.71, $p < .01$).

Subjects' own attitudes toward marijuana varied as a function of the essay content. Those who read a pro-marijuana essay expressed a more favorable attitude toward marijuana than those who read an anti-marijuana essay (Pro-marijuana: M = 5.77; Anti-marijuana: M = 4.30, $F(1,103) = 6.66$, $p < .05$). Estimates of the typical attitude toward marijuana were similarly affected (Pro-marijuana: M = 5.75; Anti-marijuana: M = 4.70, $F(1,103) = 6.37$, $p < .05$).

Second Essay.

Attributions of attitude were generally consistent with the position taken in the essay regardless of the prior category-based and target-based information (Pro-abortion Essay: M = 7.57; Anti-abortion Essay: M = 3.03, $F(1,119) = 82.9$, $p < .01$). The only effect of the prior information is reflected in a marginally significant interaction between the target-based information and the essay content ($F(1,119) = 3.52$, $p < .10$). See Figure 2. Attributions were most correspondent with the information contained in the abortion essay when the previous essay had been anti-marijuana. This was true regardless of whether or not the marijuana essay had been freely

chosen or assigned.

Attributions were not affected by the prior category-based information. However, there was a significant interaction between the category-based information and the essay direction on the confidence ratings. Subjects were most confident in their attributions when the essay direction was consistent with the category-based expectancy (Liberal, Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 8.06; Liberal, Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.00, Conservative, Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.06; Conservative, Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 8.48, $\underline{F}(1,119) = 8.01$, $\underline{p} < .01$).

The pro-abortion essay was rated as more convincing (Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.33; Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.56, $\underline{F}(1,119) = 17.15$, $\underline{p} < .01$) and more valid (Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.54; Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.42, $\underline{F}(1,119) = 24.53$, $\underline{p} < .01$) than the anti-abortion essay.

Arguments in the abortion essays were perceived as more valid when the prior category- and target-based information was inconsistent, resulting in a two-way interaction (Liberal, Pro-marijuana Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.94; Liberal, Anti-marijuana Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 6.91; Conservative, Pro-marijuana Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.00; Conservative, Anti-marijuana Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 6.19, $\underline{F}(1,119) = 4.36$, $\underline{p} < .05$).

Subjects' attitudes toward the abortion issue varied as a function of the essay content. Those who read the pro-abortion essay expressed a more favorable attitude toward abortion than those who read the anti-abortion essay (Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 7.53; Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.33, $\underline{F}(1,97) = 9.90$, $\underline{p} < .01$). Furthermore, those subjects who read a pro-abortion essay were more likely to express a pro-abortion

attitude when the essay writer was portrayed as conservative rather than liberal. No such effect was found for the anti-abortion essay, resulting in a two-way interaction between category-based information and essay direction (Liberal, Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 6.47; Conservative, Pro-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 8.53; Liberal, Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.40; Conservative, Anti-abortion Essay: $\underline{M}$ = 5.27, $\underline{F}(1,112) = 4.63$, $\underline{p} < .05$).

Discussion

The results of this research provide further evidence for the existance of the so-called observer bias. Even though observers were less confident in their attributions following the first essay when the essay position was assigned rather than freely chosen, and even though they were less confident when the essay's content was inconsistent with the prior category-based information, observers were still quite willing to make an attribution consistent with the essay content.

The bias is further demonstrated by the attributions which followed the second essay. Attributions were generally consistent with the essay content regardless of the prior category-based and target-based information, even though the writer's freedom when writing the second essay was left uncertain. Observers apparently did not assume that the writer's behavior had been constrained even in those cases where the second essay was inconsistent with the earlier information.

Apparently the earlier information did have some impact, however. Attributions for the second essay were more correspondent with the

essay content when the writer had previously expressed an anti-marijuana attitude. Perhaps, since the anti-marijuana essay was perceived as more convincing than the pro-marijuana essay, those subjects who read the anti-marijuana essay may have anticipated that the second essay would contain some worthwhile information and therefore paid greater attention to the arguments contained in that essay as compared to those subjects who initially read the pro-marijuana essay.

An unexpected result was that the perceived validity of the arguments contained in the second essay was apparently influenced by the prior category-based and target-based information. The arguments were perceived as more valid when the two prior sets of information were inconsistent with one another. Walster, Aronson, and Abrahams (1966) found that arguments tended to be more persuasive when those arguments were inconsistent with the source's category-based background. The results of this research offer suggestive evidence that such an inconsistency can have a positive effect on the perceived validity of later ideas expressed by such a person.

This effect is also reflected in the readers' assessment of their own attitudes. Those who read a pro-abortion essay were more likely to express a pro-abortion attitude when the essay writer was portrayed as conservative rather than liberal. A similar effect was not obtained among readers who read the anti-abortion essay, but this may be due to the fact that the arguments contained in that essay were apparently not perceived as very convincing.

It should be noted that the readers' own attitudes were not assessed prior to their reading of the essays. Therefore, it cannot

be determined whether any real attitude change resulted from the reading of the essays. In any case, these results indicate that the relationship between attribution processes and attitude change deserves further investigation.

The major contribution of this research project is its demonstration of the strength of the observer bias. It appears that each new input of behavioral information is perceived to be high in informational value, even when the evidence implies otherwise. Thus, although the validity of the "fundamental attribution error" is still in doubt, the existance of the "observer bias" cannot be seriously questioned.

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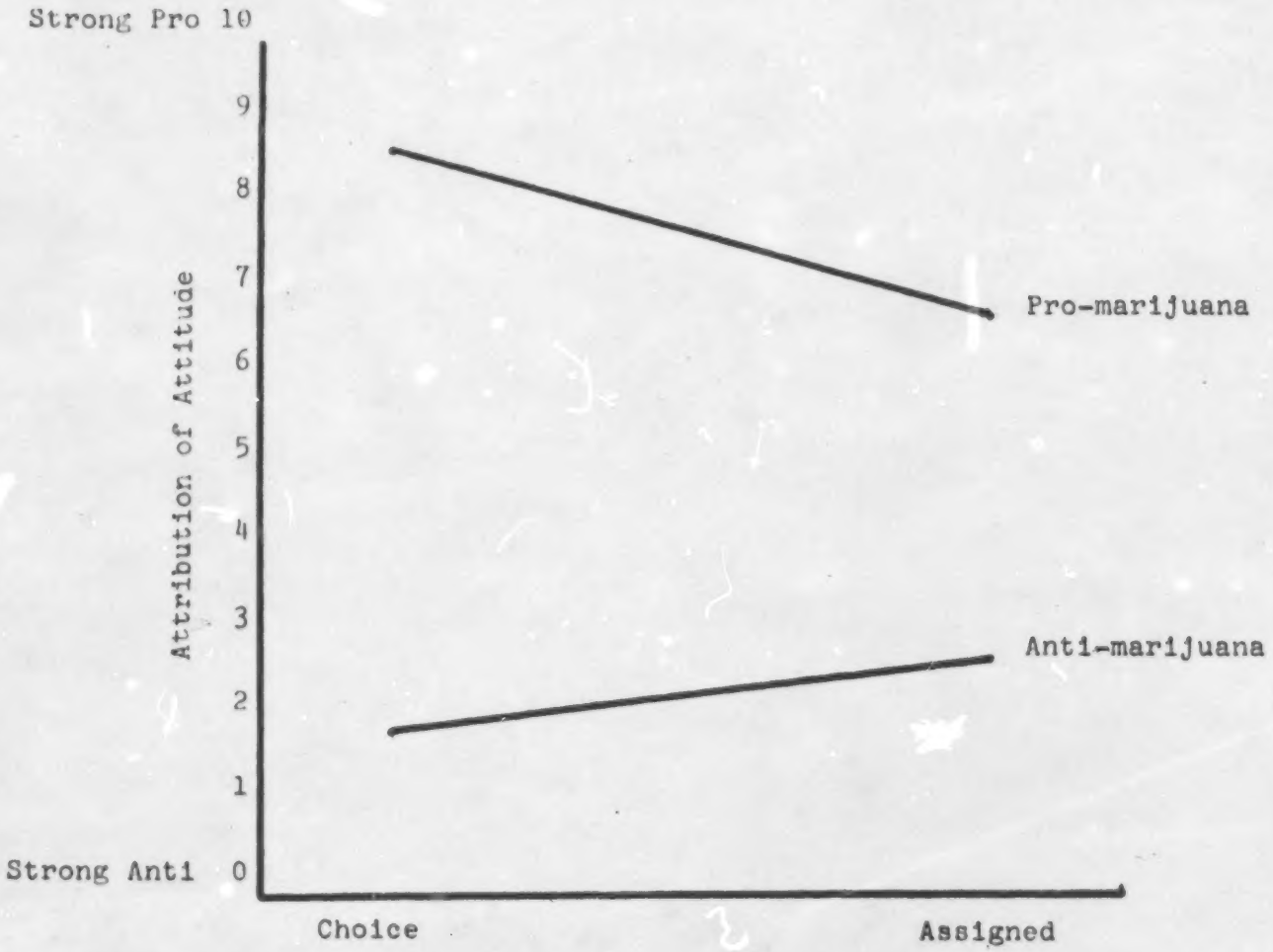

Figure 1. Attribution of Attitude (Essay 1) as a Function of Essay Direction and Writer's Freedom

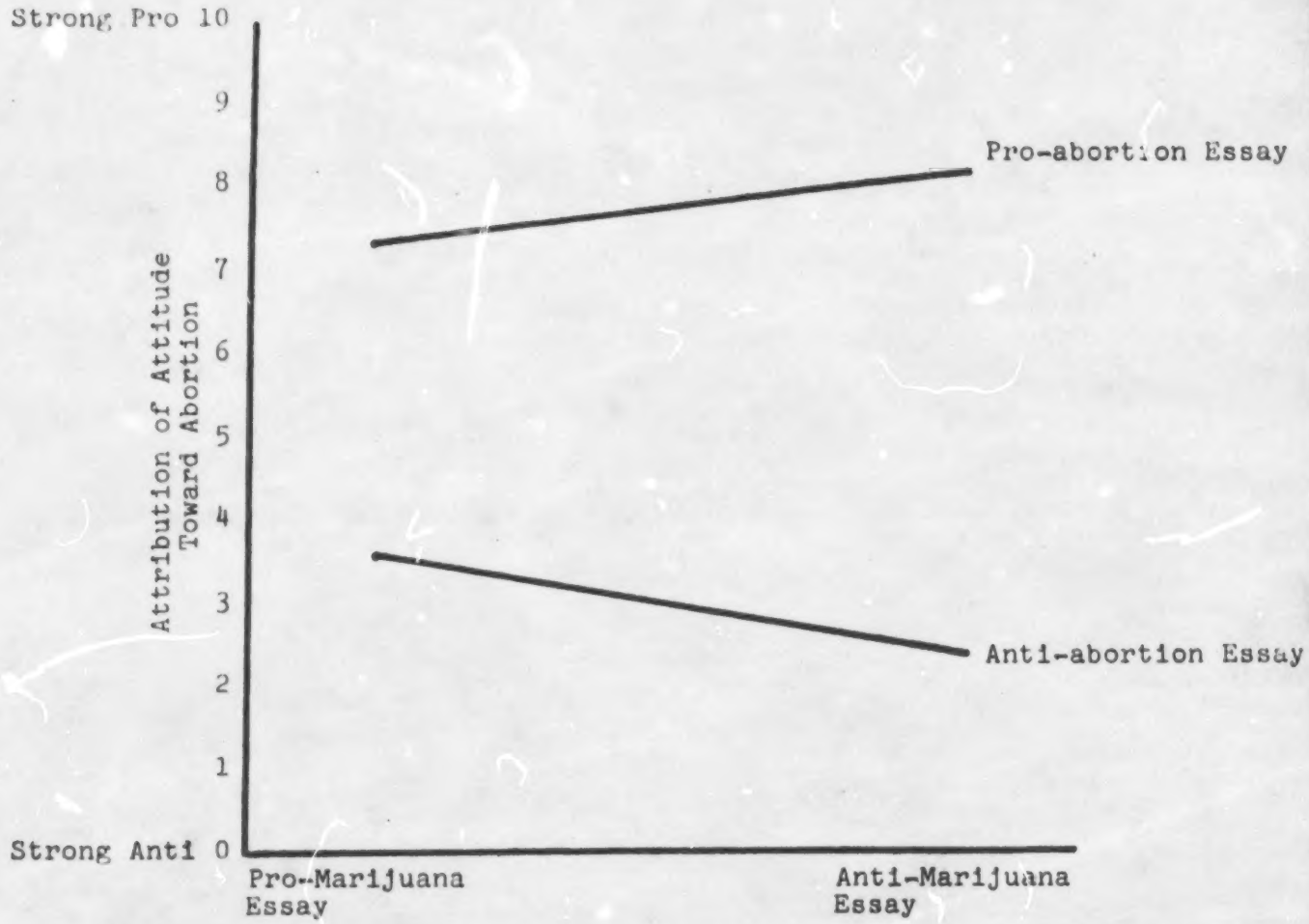

Figure 2. Attribution of attitude (Essay 2) as a Function of Essay Direction and Target-based Information (Essay 1)